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What if the Sandinistas refuse to cry 'uncle'?

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It's a very serious business when the President of the United States says his goal is to remove the government of another country.

Only the most compelling reasons can ever justify it.

After President Reagan's press conference Thursday night, there can be no doubt at all that he believes that is the case with the Marxist-dominated Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Reagan's genial demeanor could not mask the hostility he feels toward the Sandinistas or lighten the obligation he believes that the United States has to oust them from power.

"I don't think the Sandinistas have a decent leg to stand on," Reagan said as he parried questions asking whether he wanted to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. "What they've done is totalitarian, brutal, cruel. And they have no argument against what the rest of the people of Nicaragua want."

What Reagan said he wanted was for the anti-Sandinista rebels — the *contras* or "freedom fighters" as the President characterizes them — to be allowed back into Nicaragua's revolution that ousted the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979.

The Sandinistas had promised "free speech, free press, free labor unions and elections and so forth and they have violated that," he said. "The people opposing them, the freedom fighters, are Nicaraguan people who want the goals of the revolution restored."

U.S. policy is to "change the present structure of the regime, not to overthrow it," Reagan insisted, but there was a caveat: "Not if they will turn around and say — all right — if they'd say, 'Uncle', or all right, and come on back into the revolutionary government and let's straighten this out and institute the goals."

If there's a distinction between "change the present structure" and "overthrow," it's so slim that there can be no doubt now where Reagan is headed if he can persuade Congress to go along.

Congress agreed last October to appropriate \$14 million in new aid to the *contras*, but none could be given until after Feb. 28 — Thursday — and then only after the President certifies in a report to Congress that the money is needed to combat Sandinista

expansionism and then both the Senate and the House approve.

So in the weeks just ahead, the members of Congress and the American people will have to come to grips with what Nicaragua and the United States are doing in Central America and make a difficult decision.

Thus, it is fair now to ask what the *contras* have accomplished so far and whether there is compelling justification for a definite attempt to "change the present structure" of Nicaragua's government by continuing to support them.

Remember that almost immediately after taking office in 1981 the Reagan administration began to intensify pressure on the Sandinistas with threats, large-scale joint maneuvers by American and Honduran forces in Honduras, U.S. naval task forces deployed off Nicaraguan shores and secret CIA-funded support of the *contras*.

The justification for all that, the President said repeatedly, was that the Sandinistas were exporting revolution to El Salvador, its neighbor.

They were, he said, arming and training the guerrillas who were trying to overthrow a duly elected government "and as long as they do that, we're going to try and inconvenience [them] until they quit that kind of action."

Then, the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and other disclosures blew the cover off the CIA's support of the *contras*. Congress balked at putting up more money and now the President's line has changed. It was set forth Friday by White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan even more clearly than the

President did at his press conference.

"We can't tolerate a Marxist state just north of the Panama Canal," Regan told a group of editorial writers.

Though many Americans share the President's concern and his distaste for the Sandinista government, there is a big hitch in his policy. It is the *contras* themselves.

Many of their leaders were officers in the hated Somoza regime — men not likely to be welcomed back in Nicaragua under any circumstances. The *contras* are a loose force of dissident factions whose leaders have shown little willingness to fight together, and the evidence to date is that they have the power to torment the countryside but not enough to oust the Sandinistas.

Furthermore, the Reagan policy of military maneuvering and support of the *contras* has not forced the Sandinistas to

change their ways or to negotiate with the "freedom fighters." It has driven them deeper into the Soviet-Cuban orbit.

The Sandinistas do not appear to be close to saying "uncle."

What if Congress votes to release the \$14 million to the *contras* and after a year or two, there is no end in sight? What happens if the President's policy of support for the *contras* fails?

Will the President be willing to admit that our intervention has achieved nothing or will he invade Nicaragua?

That is the ultimate question that lurks behind the President's charges against the Sandinistas and the one Congress must face squarely as it decides whether to continue aid to the *contras*.